

## The Hedge Schools of County Limerick

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This article explores the provision for popular education in County Limerick in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Evidence is drawn mainly from the 1826 official Government Inquiry Report as well the Schools' Folklore Collection from 1938. This type of education was provided in 'hedge schools', but it is argued that there was a great variation in the nature and character of such schools.

*My eyelids red and heavy are  
With bending o'er the smould'ring peat  
I know the Aenid now by heart  
My Virgil read in cold and heat*

Pádraic Colum (1882-1972)

### Introduction

From the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, a great variety of schools emerged in Ireland; this was as a result of both official government policy and popular demand. Parish Schools were established by legislation in 1537, primarily to spread knowledge of the English language among the native Irish. These were followed by the Diocesan Schools, established by Queen Elizabeth I in 1570. Both Parish Schools and Diocesan Schools catered for only a handful of the school-going population and were failures. The seventeenth-century Royal Schools of James I and Erasmus Smith Foundation schools like all attempts at educational initiative were geared toward Protestant purposes only. The Charter Schools, which came into being in the fourth decade of the eighteenth century, had the expressed objective of taking the children of the poor and bringing them up as adherents of the Established Church in Ireland. The Erasmus Smith Schools and the Charter Schools had some limited success.

Though some of the schools (the Royal Schools in particular) were non-exclusive, Catholics and Presbyterians were unable, because of their religious beliefs and practices, to benefit from them. To this end both dissenting groups, Presbyterians as well as Catholics, carried on their own type of private education. For about one hundred and fifty years, from the end of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, the main source of education for the rural poor was the hedge school. Various pieces of legislation between 1665 and 1745 proscribed educational opportunities for Catholics and other Dissenters. During the first half of the eighteenth century these Penal laws were enforced to some degree, but from mid-century onwards a blind eye was often turned by the authorities.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that throughout the eighteenth century, and later, that poverty-stricken people were willing to support the private provision of educational establishments as alternatives to that provided by the State. The people and the teachers were pragmatic enough to realise that a certain level of schooling was necessary in order to enhance the life opportunities of the majority population of the country. The schoolteacher was willing to offer services in the community, which, by any stretch of the imagination, allowed for only a subsistence level of living standards. Basic economic free market laws prevailed. The teacher, therefore, was quite willing to provide a curriculum, which satisfied the parents' requirements.

During the eighteenth century a variety of titles emerged to describe these popular schools: Pay Schools, because the people paid for their child's education, Chapel Schools, because at

the end of the century when the Penal Laws were lessened in intensity or removed altogether, some schools were held in chapels, with the approval of the bishop (though this approval was not universal), Common Schools, Hedge Schools and Cabin Schools. In some areas the titles used in the vernacular were *scoileanna scairte* (hedge schools), *scoileanna móta* (schools near a river or water), *scoileanna scailpe* (schools near or under the protection of a rock) and *scoileanna gearra* (where students only attended for short period of time). There was also a handful of 'dame schools', usually in urban areas and Free Schools also existed, particularly from the 1790s onwards. These schools did not charge a fee, hence the term 'free' and were usually connected to a Society, such as the Kildare Place Society. These schools were relatively successful, and some of them embraced the notion of mixed education, i.e., various religious creeds being educated together. It was during the nineteenth century that 'mixed', or 'united' education failed as a policy.

The term 'hedge school', which developed from the customary practice of holding classes near a hedge, is really a misnomer. It is also an anachronistic term. A more correct name would be 'pay school' because the teachers were paid by the parents of the children they taught. Payment varied from school to school and usually amounted to only a shilling or two per quarter from each pupil. At times the master lived on the hospitality of the people; sometimes he was paid in kind; butter, milk, potatoes, eggs and bacon were available where money was not forthcoming. Some masters supplemented their income by drawing up leases, measuring land, making out wills, drafting memorials to the authorities, or even in manual labour on the farms in the summer time. Others worked for their keep.

Many accounts exist of the state of the schools. It would appear that the physical condition of these schools was in a less tolerable state in the eighteenth century than in the nineteenth. Among the distinguished foreign visitors to Ireland was the English agriculturalist Arthur Young. As a Parliamentary reporter and knowledgeable on rural economics he was well suited to his task of recording the state of the Irish nation. In *A Tour in Ireland*, published in 1780, he had this to say:

Some degree of education is also general, hedge schools as they are called (they might as well be termed ditch ones, for I have seen many a ditch full of scholars) are everywhere to be met with, where reading and writing are taught. Schools are also common for men, I have seen a dozen great fellows at school, and was told they were educating with an intention of being priests.<sup>1</sup>

John Howard, the prison reformer, contrasted hedge schools favourably with Charter Schools when he said:

The lower class of people in Ireland are by no means averse to the improvement of their children. At the cabins on the roadside I saw several school[s], in which, for the payment of 3s 3d Irish per quarter, children were instructed in reading, writing and accounts. Some of these I examined as to their proficiency and found them much forwarder than those of the same age in the Charter Schools.<sup>2</sup>

A less complimentary account comes from Sir John Carr:

In the summer a wretched uncharactered itinerant derives a scanty and precarious existence by wandering from parish to parish and opening a school in some ditch covered with heath and furze to which the inhabitants send their children to be instructed by the miserable breadless being who is nearly as ignorant as themselves.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, ed. C. Maxwell, (Belfast, 1983), p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> J. Howard, *Works*, vol. II (London, 1792), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in C. Maxwell, *The Stranger in Ireland* (London, 1954), p. 235.

Most of the negative interpretation came from the Establishment and its agents. Senior Catholic Church ecclesiastics also found very little of value in these privately-run 'humble academies'. Others, such as travelling writers from Britain and from the Continent had mixed views. Many commentators had favourable responses to the standard of education provided by the pay schools:

The lowest class of the Irish possess a degree of subtlety rarely to be met with among the same description of people in any country. The majority of them are perfect masters of the courtly arts of penetration and dissimulation, especially the latter. They set so high a value on learning, that the poorest labourers will often appropriate a part of their scanty earning to the education of their children. The more abstruse parts of arithmetic, and also mensuration and navigation, are taught in many of the poorest-unendowed schools of Ireland. The art of writing is often carried to its utmost perfections among the poorest of this class: and their attainments in orthography and perspicuity of style, have frequently, to my knowledge, excited the amazement of strangers.<sup>4</sup>

The island of Ireland was served by thousands of pay schools from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. A wide diversity of standards existed; from high scholarship to the provision of a rather mediocre schooling bedevilled, very often, by the absence of basic survival necessities such as proper food, clothing, and shelter.

In the early part of the eighteenth century schools were few. The 1731 House of Lords returns are an invaluable measure of their distribution.<sup>5</sup> Schooling increased in the second half of the century. The concept of schoolmaster, *máistir scoile*, became more clearly defined; there was a shift from tutoring to schooling, a measure of increased demand from below. The petition from the Charter Schools Society in 1769 to the House of Commons laid an emphasis on the growing number of schools 'dispersed in many parts of the kingdom under the direction of popish masters'.<sup>6</sup> However the numbers attending school before 1780 was small. There was rapid growth from that time onwards.<sup>7</sup>

### County Limerick

The county of Limerick was no different from any other county in Ireland - it too had an equitable proliferation of popular schools in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The teachers in these schools were dedicated to their 'calling', a number of them having been educated on the European Continent.<sup>8</sup> While the neighbouring county of Kerry was renowned for its Latin scholarship, Limerick was famous as a centre of mathematical studies. In 1826 there were three hundred and seventeen pay schools in County Limerick (excluding the city). Of these, 301 were Catholic, and 16 were Protestant. A total of 336 teachers taught in these schools - 311 male and 25 female. The average attendance was approximately 15 to 20 scholars per school, though a few had as high as 130, while others were struggling with about 10.<sup>9</sup> These figures reflect the national averages. The ratio of male/female of scholar attendance was approximately sixty per

<sup>4</sup> S. Moran, 'The People and Poets', *Catholic Bulletin* (Dec.1938) vol. xxviii, p. 892; see also D. Savage, 'Perceptions of the Popular Teacher and his School in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries' (Unpublished M.Ed. thesis, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, 2005) pp 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> 'Report on the State of Popery, 1731', *Archivium Hibernicum*, 1-4 (1912-15), quoted in L.M. Cullen, *Life in Ireland* (London, 1968), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> MSS 23.1.10, p.32; 23. B.27, p.147, see also MSS 24.A.7, p.37; 23.A.20 p. 127 (Royal Irish Academy), Cullen, *Life in Ireland*, p. 28. At this time school was beginning both to become recognizable, and in a sense, modern.

<sup>8</sup> T. Landon, *A History of Kiltleely-Dromkeen* (Limerick, n.d.) p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Second Report from the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1826, Appendix, pp 1070 - 1097.

cent male and about forty per cent female though this figure does not tell the whole story as girls did not spend as much time in school as their male counterparts.

### The School Curriculum

Most of the evidence points to the fact that these schools catered for the basic requirements of the people in the local community. Therefore, reading, writing, and arithmetic formed the cornerstones of the curriculum. An interesting insight into the curriculum in one West Limerick hedge school in the late eighteenth century survives:

Through the courtesy of Mr. Maurice Woulfe, retired Civil Servant, Bolton Street, Clonmel, I have examined the school exercises and notebooks which belonged to his grandfather, also a Maurice Woulfe (died 1843) of Cratloe, parish of Athea, west County Limerick, who attended a hedge school at Athea in the period 1791-1797. Commencing in 1791 with the 'pot-hooks and hangers' there is followed a systematic and very comprehensive mathematical course including contracted methods for the extraction of cube root, geometrical solutions, and mensuration, and leading on the advanced treatment of navigation and mathematical astronomy. There are problems dealing with the relation between Irish and Statute measures. The English exercises centre chiefly on the correct phraseology to be used in certain legal documents such as the transfer of land. These notebooks, which are now of unique interest, show that the teaching of mathematics in the schools of County Limerick followed on practically the same lines as these (sic) adopted by Peter Galligan in the Meath-Breifne region some thirty years later. The County Limerick mathematical tradition represented by such well-known names as Baggott and Irwin, stood creditably high, and many 'Poor Scholars' from Ulster travelled south to the County Limerick mathematical schools. The Athea notebooks preserve evidence of the high mathematical standards attained in the Munster Hedge Schools of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

There is also ample evidence to suggest that a variety of other subjects formed part of the daily routine. These included Latin and Greek, and in parts of County Limerick, Irish was on the menu of the school curriculum, 'Níl aon dabht ach go raibh an Ghaeilge go láidir i roinnt de na scoileanna seo... mar bhí an Ghaeilge go láidir sa tír go dtí tús an naoú haoise déag ar a laghad.'<sup>11</sup> The teaching of Irish was not universal within the hedge schools and outside of the Irish-speaking districts it was very rare-it usually depended on the particular inclinations of the master. Eoghan Caomhánach, a teacher in County Limerick, when referring to the poets, some of them teachers, stated:

To these... we are indebted for keeping alive among the people by their industry a taste for the Irish language. Patrick Carroll, a pupil of mine ... is certainly the ablest and most universal Irish linguist that I know, now in existence.<sup>12</sup>

In certain quarters the Irish language was frowned upon however to such an extent that 'tally sticks' or bataí scóir were used to discourage pupils from speaking the language. These sticks had other titles also, such as *singulum* in County Kerry. The *singulum* was used as a device to ensure that hedge school pupils did not use the Irish language outside school hours. There were versions of tally sticks used in various parts of Europe in the seventeenth century, but in the

<sup>10</sup>P. O'Connell, *The Schools and Scholars of Breifne* (Dublin, 1942), p.330, footnote.

<sup>11</sup>Séamus Ó Diollúin, 'An Ghaeilge sa Chaisleán Nua Thiar, 1800-2004' (unpublished MA thesis, Coláiste Mhuire gan Smál, Ollscoil Luimnigh, 2004) p. 56, see also pages 34 -5, 38, 57; Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick; its history and antiquities, ecclesiastical, civil, and military* (Dublin, 1866), p. 759.

<sup>12</sup>Séamus de Vail, 'Na Scoileanna Scairte', *The Past: Organ of the Uí Ginealaigh Historical Society*, (2000), pp 117-8; see also the Schools' Folklore Collection, 1937-8, Templeglantine (MS 492, Slide 152). The school in Templeglantine was held in Heffernan's house and the teacher, Ned Anglim, was a classical scholar, who had a fine collection of books in the Irish language. See *Dún Bleisce: a history* (Shannon, 1990), pp 137-9 for some discussion on hedge schools in the Doon area.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we find such devices used in Ireland, and also in Wales.<sup>13</sup>

Hedge School masters were pragmatic, and as English had become 'the language of fair and market' by 1800, hedge schools provided for the needs of the people. Many hedge school scholars would end up as clerks in Ireland and in other parts of the Empire. Therefore, the bulk of the teaching in hedge schools revolved about the functions of basic numeracy and literacy.

In some schools, however, Latin and Greek formed part of the curriculum. These subjects were taught to students who had designs on clerical or professional careers. At a hedge school in Mungret 'Mr. Quinn taught Latin and Greek to the older pupils ... he was afraid to teach Irish because there was a danger that he would be put in prison'.<sup>14</sup> A similar sentiment is expressed in the folklore of the parish of Doon where 'there was no Irish taught because people were afraid of the English to speak Irish'.<sup>15</sup> In this school, which was held in the corner of a field, the principal subjects taught were English, Latin, and Greek. French was taught in one school in Ballingarry. Elsewhere teachers taught Geography, History, Dancing, French and German,<sup>16</sup> such as the hedge schools in Dromcollogher.

Some hedge schools also taught Religion, particularly in later times when the Penal Laws were relaxed. One such parish, at Grange, where every Sunday morning at 9 o'clock, which was three hours before Mass commenced, each schoolmaster had his classes assembled around him in the Church, in the company of the parents, who listened eagerly to the unfolding contests. The Rosary was recited, and everyone joined in, including the priest. The priest occasionally gave religious instruction about Ilam.<sup>17</sup> Many teachers were also good surveyors and imparted the knowledge to those of the pupils who had an aptitude for figures, such as the school in Bruree. Others were musicians and dancers and taught those arts to pupils for additional remuneration.

One particular teacher displayed some very sound innovative methods for teaching the alphabet. In Pallaskenry the teacher used a hurley stick to teach the letter J, the back of a chair for the letter H, and a crook for S.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein another account tells us of a teacher in such a school using 'ashes spread on the hearth and the leg of a tongs to draw circles and triangles in order to demonstrate the Rule of Euclid'.<sup>19</sup> In Mountrussell, near Ardpatrick, the teacher 'was great in astronomy and was continually holding forth on his favourite subject and his own knowledge of it'.<sup>20</sup> This man emigrated to Australia where he entered a seminary there and ultimately became a bishop.<sup>21</sup> A hedge school master in Kiltely-Dromkeen was a celebrated man called O'Hennigan who taught in Kiltely and who had as one of his pupils, one Patrick Quinn, a Monaghan man, an excellent mathematician and who was at a later stage tutor to the politician John Sadlier of Shronell of Sadlier's Bank notoriety. Members of the Quinn family were teachers of Latin for several generations.<sup>22</sup>

The hedge school master was fond of pedantry - he was a linguistic showman. He had to be, as this was how he attracted scholars in order to earn a living. He frequently taught illustrative sentences to his students. These were written on slates and learned by rote - such sentences impressed parents and neighbours alike. 'Truth will be at last triumphant', 'the night will come when no man can work', 'a man's manner often decides his fortune' are some examples of the hedge school master's repertoire. Sentences such as these must have had some kind of appeal to a people who were straddling two cultures; moving from one heritage to a more commercially oriented experience. English was seen as the way toward self-improvement, and if the school

<sup>13</sup> J. Ryan, *Féil-Sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin, 1995) pp 551-2.

<sup>14</sup> Schools' Folklore Collection, MS 527, Slide 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, MS 519, Slide 160.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, MS 497, Slide 154A.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, MS 516, Slide 160.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, MS 504, Slide 156.

<sup>19</sup> B. Long, 'A Little Learning', *Living at the Time of the Siege of Limerick: Essays in Social History* (ed. B. Dewar, Limerick, n.d.), p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> J. Fleming, *Ardpatrick County Limerick* (Limerick, 1978), p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Landon, *Kiltely-Dromkeen*, p. 57.

master could provide the pupil with the rudiments of the language, or higher, he was welcomed in the community and paid for this service.

### School Descriptions

There is a whole host of descriptions<sup>23</sup> of pay schools for County Limerick: there were mud cabins, thatched houses, stone and lime built, a small confined room, a good school room, a bad room in an old house, a miserable garret, a wretched room, a room in a private house, a bad cabin, a good stone house, school held in a cow house,<sup>24</sup> school held in the chapel, an apartment in an old ruinous shed, a miserable cow house, a wretched hovel, a bad school house, school in a store house, school built of sods and mud, a hired apartment, a miserable hut, and one Catholic school was held in the Methodist preaching house in Kilscannel (near Kilmoylan), and so on. Mud and thatched schools were the most prominent types, by far.<sup>25</sup> At least one school in County Limerick was held in a cow house, and in the same parish of Castleconnell, a man named Doyle held his school in the local graveyard<sup>26</sup>

Many hedge schools were erected very quickly by the local people and many of them were built with sods, such as the one at Rahin, Grange.<sup>27</sup> There were also more substantial buildings used as schools. In Granagh, Bruree, the higher part of a building was used as the school, while the lower level was the teacher's residence.<sup>28</sup> In other instances the teacher used his own room or house as a classroom during the day.<sup>29</sup> An example of this is where Mr. Halpin in Ballyhahill taught the scholars inside his house in bad weather and outside when conditions changed.

One location in Castleconnell was near a big sandpit called 'Round Plump' where two teachers, Thomas Kelly and John O'Brien, taught. They were paid one penny a week by each pupil and Irish was the medium of instruction in this school. These two teachers could not lodge in the farmhouses which was customary because there was a price of £5 on their heads.<sup>30</sup>

In Murroe, one school was known as 'Ivy Wall Ivy' because ivy grew both inside and outside the building. The teacher here also gave night classes to older scholars.<sup>31</sup> A school in Cappamore was described as tumbled down thatched house with a hole in the wall where books were kept, where high flat stones were used for seats. Another, in Cappamore, was a cow house, and following milking in the morning, the day's teaching and learning began, on occasions with a sick cow still in the 'classroom.'<sup>32</sup> The teacher, Mr. Larry Dwyer, taught in a place called 'the school house field... ahide'[sic] from the attentions of the authorities.<sup>33</sup> There

<sup>23</sup>T. Toomey and H. Greensmyth, *An Antique and Storied Land: a history of Donoughmore, Knockea, Roxborough, Co. Limerick and its Environs* (Limerick, 1991) pp 160-1.

<sup>24</sup>Schools' Folklore Collection, MS 519, Slide 160, offers a very interesting account of school accommodation: 'When the cows were let out in the morning the scholars and the master came in and carried on their work of Education as best they could. (Of course if a cow showed any signs of illness she had to be left inside all day.) The pupils sat along in the bails (sic) where the cows used be tied. The beginners wrote on slates and the more advanced pupils wrote on paper.' See also Gerard Curtin, *Recollections of our Native Valley: a history of Loughill-Ballyhahill* (Ballyhahill, 1996) pp 231-5.

<sup>25</sup>Second Report from the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1826, Appendix, pp. 1070-1097.

See also for other description of schools, Mainchín. Seoighe, *The Story of Kilmallock* (Kilmallock, 1987) pp 176-7 and idem, *Dromin-Athlaccá* (Áth Leacach, 1978) pp 98-100.

<sup>26</sup>Schools' Folklore Collection, MS 523, p. 238.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., MS 516, Slide 160 'A teacher named Andy Slattery once taught there and when Laurence Week's grandfather who lived at Knockfennel ... was over seven years of age his father took him to Rahin School and the said father who was a real pompous empty individual told the lucky Andy Slattery that if he could teach his son the ABC inside of two years he would give him a present of a new suit, a tall hat and a five pound note. However sad to relate, poor Andy Slattery never got any of those rewards...'. See also M.V. Spillane, 'Two Centuries of Popular Education- An Historical Survey of the Educational Institutions of Limerick, 1700-1900', *Educational Studies Association of Ireland Conference Proceedings* (1976) p. 59.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., MS 499, Slide 154.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., MS 482, Slide 151; See also Laura Collins, 'The Hedge Schools of Tournafulla', (Unpublished Graduate Diploma Local Research Project, Mary Immaculate College, 2002).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., MS 523, Slide 162.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., MS 522, Slide 160.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., MS 521, Slide 161.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

was one teacher in Fedamore who had two schools in different parts of the parish and taught on alternate weeks.<sup>34</sup> This was rather an unusual occurrence, although it was common for teachers to teach during the day, and also at nighttime.

School furniture was both scarce and primitive. Seating was often on logs, or on stones, often held in places where the 'scholars' had no copybooks, no proper pencils, no desks, no books, where lack of heating was a major problem.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes too, schools were held in farmers' houses where there were stools or chairs, where they also had pens and pencils, as well as books, such as *Reading Made Easy*. Most hedge school pupils used slates, as did the master.

In the absence of basic resources both teacher and pupil displayed their inventive skills. The big slate used by the teacher and the smaller ones used by the pupils were manufactured locally in some quarry. In instances where pencils could be used, these were made from sharpened stones collected from the bed of a river. In cases where there was paper the teachers made their own ink<sup>36</sup> from the juice of blackberries or elderberries or from galls<sup>37</sup> got from the oak tree, and cut their own pens from goose quills or crows' quills. Scholars often carried with them a little bottle of ink tied to the buttonhole of their coats.

### Teachers and School Discipline

There is no reason to believe that hedge schoolmasters were any harsher towards their pupils than other teachers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Society's code of morals throughout Europe dictated that schools were expected to implement rather severe disciplinary measures. It is likely that hedge schools were no exception to common practice at the time. It is interesting to note that the teachers were held in very high esteem by the community and acting *in loco parentis* they had a free hand to mete out in the schools whatever degree of punishment was acceptable in the children's homes. One must not forget that it was common practice for teachers to be lodged in the homes of the children they taught. 'He had his meals at the houses where he happened to be at meal time and then he slept where he ended the day's work'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, for this reason alone there must have been a mutual understanding, and acceptance, of school practice. Interesting modes of discipline and punishment were in vogue.<sup>39</sup>

One method of punishment used was called 'hoisting'<sup>40</sup> where one scholar was hoisted onto another's back and appropriate punishment meted out. One such account comes from Templeglantine where one boy, called Séamus Mór, whose back was usually called into service on such occasions.<sup>41</sup> The fact that one particular teacher was known as 'leather-head' may indicate something of his character!<sup>42</sup> Another description of a method of discipline is

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., MS. 517, Slide 160

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Slide 162 which describes a school in Mungret where the children were seated on stones 'but the master's desk was a log of timber flattened on top. Now and again they may have a fire of sticks gathered by the pupils about the ditches. But, they were never let up to it as the big bully spent more of his time at the fire than he taught them'.

<sup>36</sup> See *ABC News* (Askeaton/Ballysteen, 1995), p.10 There is a short reference here as to how ink was also made from the crushed ashes of wheat straw diluted with water.

<sup>37</sup> The ink on most pages of the Book of Kells consists of iron-gall ink made from crushed oak apples and sulphate of iron in a medium of gum and water. Despite the highly corrosive properties that caused iron gall ink to pass out of widespread use by the early twentieth century, it is arguably the most important ink in Western history. Known by the Romans and widely used after the late Middle Ages, iron gall ink is not easily erased, and this property made it an obvious choice for record keeping of any sort. Libraries and archives around the world hold a vast number of manuscripts collections ranging from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, early drafts of the American Constitution, and music compositions such as J.S. Bach all executed in iron gall ink. This information was contributed by Dr. Colum Kenny, Dublin City University.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., MS 483, Slide 151.

<sup>39</sup> These were no more severe than the methods employed by the Monitorial Schools of the Empire in the early nineteenth century. These methods were accepted by successive governments of the day.

<sup>40</sup> Martin McCormack, 'Reflections on Kildimo' 1996, p. 118.

<sup>41</sup> Schools' Folklore Collection, MS 492, Slide 152.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. The teacher's name was Collins and he was a "stranger" which meant he came from another parish or, perhaps, another county.

recorded from Cnoc na Sná school, near Abbeyfeale. The teacher, Mr. Foley, decreed that when a pupil wished to leave the school for some reason he or she had to take a 'pass' which was found hanging at the back of the door. The 'pass' in this case was the shin bone of a calf marked with the teacher's initials-to ensure that if the 'pass' got mislaid or lost there was no time for a quick replacement.<sup>43</sup> In another school in the parish of Abbeyfeale, a cow's horns were used to equally good effect! 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' was the accepted maxim of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### Teacher Training

As 'Training Colleges' or 'Colleges of Education' did not exist, an apprenticeship system of teacher training was adopted throughout the country. There appears to have been an understanding between teacher and parent as to who might be a likely candidate for teaching as a career. When the parents noticed that one of the family was displaying a certain high level of intelligence it was common for that child to be relieved of certain domestic chores and was also better clothed than other brothers and sisters.<sup>44</sup>

When the hedge school scholar felt he had the master drained of all his knowledge he had a contest in verse with him. If he succeeded in this preliminary challenge he had another contest with a more learned master. If he won this he remained away from home for a few years, challenging others, and teaching in various parts of the country for a very meagre return. During this time he was known as 'The Poor Scholar' or 'The Wandering Scholar', developing his skills as a teacher and increasing his store of knowledge. Knowledge was considered to be of greater import than teaching methodologies, and a 'good' master was usually judged by his knowledge. The training of the hedge schoolmaster embraced the principles of the older apprenticeship system, where the younger, but upcoming pedagogue learned his craft from the older, wiser practitioner. When his apprenticeship was concluded he usually returned to his native parish and usurped the position of his own hedge schoolteacher.

Teachers who were self-appointed, and this was the norm, were in the habit of trying to best one another. For instance, a teacher would write a letter to another, written in the highest possible literary style, which was usually answered in equal measure, or even higher. This intellectual struggle went on and on until such time that one contestant threw in the towel. The people of the neighbourhood always knew about this clash of the quills and they then sent their children to the victor, the vanquished, who was often the better teacher, being 'despised'.<sup>45</sup>

Teacher 'training' was, therefore a protracted process, involving years of trial and challenge, and it was the community that acted as judge and jury, and decided on who was the best qualified to teach its children.

### Some well-known hedge schoolteachers in County Limerick

'The Academy in the Glen', situated in Cratloe, in West Limerick was a well-known school, not least because of its longevity. This school was in the hands of Michael Sheehan who, for the first time in the 1850s, welcomed his scholars to his humble academy. The school was held in an outhouse belonging to one Richard E. Woulfe, a scholar in his own right. As Sheehan had been teaching at another school at Harnett's Cross in the early 1850s, he must have been a very old man when the school at Cratloe finally put up the shutters in 1900 when the number of scholars had fallen to only 5 from about 80-90 in the 1880s. Master Sheehan did not have the reputation of a harsh master. Nevertheless, Mrs. Woulfe, from across the yard, was, on some occasions,

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., MS 495, p. 261.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., MS 496, Slide 153, this account was written by Willie Cotter, Kilconlea, and his teacher was also called Cotter, presumably a relative.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., MS 504, Slide 156, p. 376, this account refers to a school in Pallaskenry in 1843. The teacher was Mr. Hanly.



required to make a timely appeal for mercy.<sup>46</sup> 'Sheehan's Academy' must surely have been the last of these schools in the country!

James Baggott-'the Great O'Baggott' of Ballingarry, a mathematician whose reputation was of a European standing, was born in Ballingarry, in 1771 where he died in 1806 at the age of 35. Though born, living and dying in the same small Co. Limerick village, his fame as a mathematician spread to Dublin, London, and even Paris.<sup>47</sup> Scholars travelled from all over Ireland to his Mathematical School. He was well known to the French physicist, Laplace (1749-1827), who at one time had Napoleon Bonaparte as his pupil.<sup>48</sup> Baggott was also a political activist and it is said that he entertained Lord Edward Fitzgerald during the early months of 1798. He was not arrested, and in 1803, to coincide with Emmett's rising in Dublin, Baggott produced a daring plan to capture Limerick city and personally led some 2,000 men to within a few miles of the city. Following the failure of the Rising he returned to his school duties at Ballingarry.

Another local Mathematician of renown was James Irwin. He was a surveyor and he also published a book, *A Treatise on Gunnery in Theory and Practice*. Students attending Irwin's classes were prepared for the army and the navy. He also had a school in the city. Like Baggott, Irwin attracted students from all over the island who had a particular interest in mathematics and kindred subjects. He was in a position to keep boarders.<sup>49</sup>

The noted eighteenth-century poet Aindreas McCraith was also a schoolmaster, and other persons associated with the Mague School of Poetry were Maurice Griffin, a schoolmaster in Ballygaddy and Thomas Gleeson, a classical scholar from Adare.<sup>50</sup> Another famous school was in Dromin-Athlaca, run by Mr. Buckley. His school operated in the 1780s and 90s and was described in Fitzgerald and McGregor's *History of Limerick*<sup>51</sup> as the best school in Munster. Sir Matthew Tierney, born in 1776, a future graduate of Edinburgh University, and later, personal physician to George IV, attended Mr. Buckley's school.

### Teachers and Politics

There is significant evidence to suggest that some hedge schoolteachers in the eighteenth century were involved in political disturbances and various forms of unrest. In 1711 we find Charles Coniers sought after for harbouring one Thomas O' Gorman, a popish schoolmaster, but Coniers eluded the law. In March, 1714, Denis O'Brien and John Kennedy, popish schoolmasters were indicted. Likewise, in March 1721, John Cannon, a papist, was indicted for teaching school. There were other examples also where teachers were found guilty of flouting the law. The fate of those who were apprehended is not quite clear. These examples are taken from the Presentment Book of the Grand Jury of Limerick, some of which is illegible and much of which was destroyed in the Four Courts in 1922. A fine or transportation to penal servitude was the most likely outcome.<sup>52</sup> It is very likely that the full rigours of the law were applied in the early decades of the eighteenth century. However, after the 1730s the law was not applied so stringently.

<sup>46</sup> See Pádraig Ó Maidín, 'Today: A Hedge School in County Limerick', *The Cork Examiner* 15 Nov. 1971; J.D.Harnett, 'Last of the Limerick Hedge Schools', *The Limerick Leader*, 27 April, 1935; C. M. Lane, 'An Insight into some of the later Hedge Schools in West Limerick in the Nineteenth century' (Unpublished postgraduate project in the History of Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Nov. 1999).

<sup>47</sup> R. Herbert, 'Four Limerick Hedge-Schoolmasters', *The Irish Monthly*, no. 72, (1944) p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> M.V. Spillane, 'Two Centuries of Popular Education- An Historical Survey of the Educational Institutions of Limerick, 1700-1900' (Unpublished M. Ed. Thesis, University College Cork, 1973), Chap. 1, p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> Spillane offers considerable detail on both Baggott and Irwin, *ibid.*, pp 131-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> P. Fitzgerald and J.J. McGregor, *The history, topography, and antiquities of the county and city of Limerick* (Limerick, 1826), Seoighe, *Dromin-Athlacca*, p. 98.

<sup>52</sup> Spillane, 'Historical Survey of the Educational Institutions of Limerick' chap.1, p. 127. For a discussion on the political aspects surrounding teachers see L. M. Cullen, 'The Cultural Base of Modern Irish Nationalism', in R. Mitchison (ed.) *The Roots of Nationalism: Studies in Northern Europe* (Edinburgh, 1980) pp 101-3.

A Whiteboy leader in Tournafulla in the 1760s using the name Captain Starlight was a 'hedge school master on the run'. He taught in Kilaculleen and was named Morgan.<sup>53</sup> Another hedge schoolmaster who was involved in politics was Staker Wallis, from Kilfinane. He walked to and from his school every day, a round trip of fourteen miles. He was hanged in Kilmallock on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1798 for participation in the United Irishmen. His hedge school was situated in the present townland of Ballylooby.

According to L.M. Cullen schoolmasters were evident everywhere in sedition in the 1790s<sup>54</sup> Micheál Óg Ó Longáin and some of his circle represented the new forces of subversion, and although schoolmasters were too lowly on their own to be vanguards of radicalisation, local support coincided with their political standpoint.<sup>55</sup> In 1816 at the special sessions at Rathkeale, under the Insurrection Act, one man described as a country schoolmaster, an alleged writer of Captain Rock's orders, was transported.<sup>56</sup>

### General Comment and Conclusion

The whole history of the hedge schools forms one of the most interesting chapters in the history of Irish education. These schools came into being as both a manifestation of the desire on the people's part for education, and as a direct reaction to the initiation of the Penal Laws. The schools were the most important element in Irish popular education during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries.

The schools were generally small, cramped, and overcrowded, allowing little space, or freedom of movement to their pupils. Yet, the people sallied forth, characterised by a remarkable appreciation for these intellectual institutions. It has been calculated that, at their highest point of existence, 9,000 different schools served the needs of the children of the Catholic and Presbyterian persuasions.<sup>57</sup> These schools catered for needs of over 400,000 students in the 1820s.

The hedge schoolmaster usually moved from one district to another, spending perhaps a month or so in each locality, often much longer, depending on the financial circumstances of the community. As he was not, in the strict sense of the term, under the supervision of any authority, local or otherwise, he merely collected as many pupils as he could, taught them while they could come to him, and then moved on to the next area. This happened when the well dried up or when his position was usurped by a younger teacher.

As there was keen competition among schools, reputations were won only by the superiority of the master's teaching. The standard of school infrastructure often depended upon the support of the local priest, as he had from the end of the eighteenth century a considerable say in the success or otherwise of the local school. It was at this time that the mutually supportive role of teacher-priest began.

The least he taught were the three R's viz., reading, writing and arithmetic, but subjects like history, geography, bookkeeping, surveying, and navigation would appear in the curriculum. Latin and Mathematics were fairly commonly taught, occasionally some Greek.

The hedge schoolmaster's attitude toward knowledge evoked a certain respect from both his pupils and their parents. The teacher in Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was respected more for his knowledge than for his teaching prowess. There was an assumption abroad that knowledge equated with teaching ability. His position in the locality was held in relatively high esteem; he was friend to many, he was their guide and advisor. He applied his talents to the various needs of the people and his prestige grew with his activities.

<sup>53</sup> Kathleen Curtin, 'A History of Tournafulla' *Fáilte go Tuar na Fola, Parish Annual* (Dec. 2003) p. 7. See also L. Collins, 'Hedge Schools of Tournafulla', p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Cullen, 'The Cultural Base of Modern Irish Nationalism', pp 101-3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Lenihan, *History of Limerick*, p. 442.

<sup>57</sup> G. Balfour, *The Educational System of Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1903), p. 79.

Many were impressed by the hedge schoolmaster's scholarship. For well over a century and a half he was acknowledged as a man of learning, a man of light and leading in his district. The fact that the hedge schools, as institutions of learning, survived for so long, bears testimony to their character and intellectual ruggedness. Hedge schoolteachers were idiosyncratic, not believing in rules and regulations imposed externally; the atmosphere in the schools was one of hurly-burly, as opposed to the rigid discipline imposed on the National Schoolteacher.

Hedge schools were often criticised in that there was no order or regularity observed and that the pupils pined with cold on the damp floors. Yet evidence establishes that the hedge schools did produce able scholars, not only for the priesthood but for universities as well. They also prepared students for work as actuaries, shopkeepers and the general occupations one finds in society. Yet official reports do not acknowledge these achievements. Very often it is the deplorable physical conditions under which the teachers and pupils worked that are brought to light.

One cannot escape the fact, however, that generally, the curriculum was essentially elementary in nature, but there were more than a few instances where genuine scholarly endeavours were witnessed. The mathematical schools of county Limerick bear testimony to the attainment of standards of an advanced nature. The official Government Reports, more often than not, neglected to mention the wealth of literature available within the hedge school tradition. Time and again, they re-emphasised the schoolmaster's predilection for pedantry, the unsuitable surroundings of the hedge school pupils, the sedition and immoral teachings of the hedge schoolmasters and the ill-qualified and untrained conditions of the pedagogues.

However, it is well worth considering that in the reports of the Powis Commission in 1870 we find, for the first time, an admission that there may well have been something valuable taking place in the hedge schools of old and therefore that the earlier Reports lacked some credibility. Some writers, on the other hand, have invested the hedge school with a sentimental halo, offering a very picturesque, romantic and emotive image. No doubt the truth lies somewhere between the extremes recounted in the official reports and the far more favourable outlooks of many contemporary accounts.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed, for the first time, a realisation by governments, of the political and social power that control of the education system could wield. To achieve jurisdiction over the education process, governments in France, Prussia and England, with the help of utilitarian philosophers in the field, began to set in motion the means by which the schoolchildren of the day, and during the remainder of the nineteenth century, were presented with a highly rigid, formal and systematised approach to teaching and learning. Knowledge, in a hierarchical form, was presented in a mechanical and factual manner. The school's role was seen merely as a functional one.

However, the system became efficient and it was relatively inexpensive. Large numbers of pupils, especially where the monitorial system was employed, could be taught by one teacher, with the result that basic literacy and numeracy increased enormously as the nineteenth century progressed. In the minds of those who contributed to the gradual evolution of systems of education motives were mixed and varied. In most cases, religion, morals, ethics, politics or nationalism were the prime motivators in such schemes. In the Ireland of the early nineteenth century, such themes presented themselves in no uncertain fashion.

Many commissions of inquiry were instigated, beginning in 1791, and continuing until the foundation of the National School System of 1831. The cumulative evidence of these commissions of inquiry led to the substitution of 'a systematic and uniform plan of instruction in place of the ill-taught and ill-regulated schools' - namely the hedge schools. It is against this type of planned mechanical education that the vitality and individuality of the hedge school tradition, despite its shortcomings, must be placed.

The National Board of Education of 1831 took over the work of the efficient scheme which

had been pioneered by the Kildare Place Society. An inspectorate, a ready supply of relatively inexpensive and graded books, model schools for teacher training and the semblance of a standard gratuity to teachers, were part and parcel of the new regulated and systematised approach of the National Board. No longer would the teacher have the autonomy to teach where and when, and what he liked. From now on the curriculum was carefully assembled, not by the teachers themselves, as in the case of the hedge schools, but by persons appointed by the Board.

The National Board teacher should be a person of Christian sentiment, of calm temper and discretion and he should be imbued with a spirit of peace, of obedience to the law and of loyalty to the sovereign. Yet, he was mistrusted. His position forbade him to partake in meetings, fairs or markets or to participate in elections other than by voting. In the execution of his duties 'the great rule of regularity and order - a time for everything and everything in its time, a place for everything and everything in its place' was enjoined as a basic guideline. In short the National Board teacher lacked the relative freedom enjoyed by the hedge schoolmaster.

The hedge schoolmaster was in control of the curriculum, the books used in the schools were of his own choosing. The philosophy of education surrounding the hedge school allowed for almost complete freedom in methods of teaching and the perspective of the schoolteacher by the community extended to him a freedom in his personal life-style.

One cannot deny that the freedom enjoyed by the master within the confines of the school afforded him a certain amount of scope for engaging in experiment and for creative and spontaneous teaching. He was allowed to express himself imaginatively, without constraints, and without adherence to formalities and strict practices of routine. The 'scholar' was allowed to read and study what appealed to him - tales of the imaginative adventure, mystery, terror, fantasy or folktales were the means through which the affective areas of his character were developed. In this there was a richness of interplay, both between master and pupil, and between pupil and subject:

Unallied to either the bardic [sic] or monastic educational systems, he was truly 'of the people', whether himself a product of a hedge school, a poet turned schoolmaster, or a member of a scholar family with an ancient intellectual heritage. He was distinguished from the rest of the community only by his learning in an age when schoolmasters and poets alike might also of necessity be farm labourers. New poets rose from the community, and the songs of the poets became the songs of the people.<sup>58</sup>

The other tradition, evinced in the systematised approach to education, called for a shaping or a moulding of character to be established from the criteria of the strict guidelines of centralised administration. The curriculum was imposed, certain textbooks were prescribed without room for imagination or personality development, and rules and regulations were deemed to be the hub of the system, around which the educational process revolved. A tight rein was kept on teachers and their activities, with the result that their professional, personal and social practices were limited. It seems that teacher activities outside the schoolhouse were deemed to be equally important as those within.

On the other hand, the means of enforcing rules and regulations, is no doubt, a commendable enterprise and often a valuable asset, but concerning education in the nineteenth century, it may well have squeezed out the invaluable idiosyncratic aspects of the individual pupil and teacher which existed within the hedge school tradition. In this tradition there was an element of pride in the schoolmaster's self-image. Locally, he was regarded highly, both as a teacher and as a person. In his schoolroom practices he paid less attention to the 'mere forms' and arrangements of his surroundings, but he afforded his 'scholars' the opportunity of an education which was characterised by the twin ideals of intellectual development and a 'love of learnin'.

<sup>58</sup>J. Henigan, 'For Want of Education: the Origins of the Hedge Schoolmaster Songs', *Ulster Folklife* no. 40 (1994) p. 38.

Hedge school education relied mostly on the individual resourcefulness, zeal, and improvisation of the teacher. The systems' approach, while not excluding these virtues, presented the teacher as more of an agent or functionary within a mechanical and rigid process, whose task was to impart a certain set of knowledge in an environment which was determined by the wishes of those in control of the education system. Both teacher and pupil in such circumstances lacked the means to offer any creditable form of self-expression. And, while the necessity for a strict code of practices and routine, in a relative sense, cannot be denied, the systematic approach to education and its philosophy seem to have been overpowered by them.

If the freedom and autonomy, the idiosyncratic styles, as well as the emphasis on the local environment experienced in the less custodial 'humble academies' could have been encapsulated in the better organised and more formal state-aided schools, then the emerging system might have been more inspiring in the long run, and of greater benefit to those involved.

